

PARENT GUIDE TO THE IOWA ALTERNATE ASSESSMENT BASED ON ALTERNATE ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS 2009-2010

This guide provides information on Iowa's Alternate Assessment for parents. A question-and-answer format is used to summarize information. While the document was designed for parents, others involved with alternate assessment might also find some of the information relevant. Steve Maurer is the alternate assessment lead. He can be reached at steve.maurer@iowa.gov or at 515-281-3576.

1. **What is an alternate assessment?** An alternate assessment is an assessment designed for a small number of students with disabilities who are unable to participate in the regular grade level state assessment (ITBS/ITED) even with appropriate accommodations.
2. **Why must Iowa have an alternate assessment?** *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* requires that all students, even those with the most significant cognitive disabilities, have access to the general education curriculum. For accountability purposes, all students in grades 3-8 and at a high school grade must be assessed on performance against grade level state content standards. In addition, the *Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* also requires students with disabilities to participate in the statewide assessment system and that the student's IEP contain a statement of how the student will participate in the statewide assessment process. Alternate assessment allows students who cannot participate in the general assessment, to be assessed more equitably given their current performance.
3. **What is the purpose of the Iowa Alternate Assessment (IAA)?** The IAA assesses educational performance in reading, mathematics, and science, and promotes access to the general education curriculum.
4. **Who participates in the Iowa Alternate Assessment?** Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The IEP team, which includes parents, makes this decision based on state participation guidelines. Students in grades 3-8 and 11 participate in the reading and math alternate assessment and students in grades 5, 8, and 11 participate in the science alternate assessment. All students with disabilities must be included in statewide assessments. The IEP team plays a role in deciding how a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities will take the statewide assessment. The decision should be based on educational needs and parents should be active in this decision process. If the parents and their child's IEP team decide that the child will take an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards, the IEP must contain a statement about why the student cannot participate in the regular assessment, and how the particular alternate assessment selected is appropriate for the child.

5. **What is the Iowa Alternate Assessment process?** The Iowa Alternate Assessment has several steps:
- Teachers describe student characteristics using a general survey
 - Teachers rate students using rating scales that focus on reading, math, and science, and are aligned with the Iowa Core Content Standards and Benchmarks (material covered in the ITBS/ITED)
 - Teachers use evidence gathered as part of the student's school program to support the ratings
 - Teachers review results with building administrators and parents
 - Teachers complete a survey about the process and supports needed to better meet needs of students
6. **Is the IEP the curriculum for a student with the most significant cognitive disabilities?** Students should be exposed to the range of skills representative of the general curriculum including academic, social, and adaptive skills. The IEP represents skills that the IEP team has prioritized for the student, that require on-going monitoring and are evaluated annually. Hence, while the IEP certainly represents educational priorities and supports to achieve those educational priorities for the individual student, it does not represent the entire range of curriculum; nor does it represent the academic standards upon which a curriculum should be based.
7. **Can my child's IEP be used as the alternate assessment?** This question has been so prevalent, that the answer to the question is actually part of the guidance on alternate assessment that states receive from the federal government, and the answer is, "no, progress on IEP cannot be used as the alternate assessment."

The rationale is that IEP goals are individual to each child and are developed for the purpose of: (a) reporting progress to parents, and (b) making decisions about programs and services a child receives. Because IEP goals are often not aligned with state academic content standards (Iowa Core Content Standards and Benchmarks), IEP goals cannot be used to measure whether schools are meeting accountability goals for Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB.

Learning functional skills may be an important component of your child's IEP, but it is also critical that your child have access to the general curriculum and that your child's academic achievement be counted for AYP purposes

8. **Why is Iowa's Alternate Assessment based on alternate achievement standards?** Students have the right to be assessed fairly. The Iowa alternate assessment measures student progress on Iowa's Core Content Standards and Benchmarks at a reduced complexity, and is judged against a different definition of proficiency than the ITBS/ITED. Student's participation will most likely be supported by assistive technology, adaptations, and prompting and cueing strategies.
9. **What are Content Standards and Benchmarks?** Content Standards and Benchmarks define what students should know and be able to do. For NCLB purposes, the Iowa Core Content Standards and Benchmarks describe what

students should be doing in grades 3-8 and 11, in reading, mathematics, and science. An example of a Content Standard in Grade 6 Math is, “Students can understand and apply a variety of math concepts.” A benchmark for that same standard is, “students can understand and apply concepts of geometry and measurement.”

10. **What are Achievement Standards?** Achievement Standards have 3 components: performance levels, performance descriptors, and cut scores.
 - **What are Performance Levels?** Performance Levels label each level of achievement. In Iowa, we have three performance levels: Basic, Proficient, and Advanced.
 - **What are Performance Descriptors?** Performance Descriptors built by consensus, are written to reflect high expectations of what children know and can do both within a grade level and between grades.
 - **What are Cut Scores?** Numerical scores that separate the different levels of performance. For example, on a 40-item rating scale on which items can be rated 0 points, 1 point, 2 points, or 3 points, basic performance might be represented by scores ranging from 0-50, proficient performance represented by scores ranging from 51-100, and advanced performance represented by scores ranging from 101 and higher. Each grade (3-8 and 11) and each content area (reading and math) (grade 5, 8, and 11 for science) has cut scores developed by panels of general education teachers, special education teachers, and parents.
11. **What is a rating scale?** These scales in reading, mathematics, and science are a list of academic skills for each grade and content area tested. The skills are aligned with the Core Content Standards and Benchmarks, but are reduced in complexity and are easier concepts than what is covered in the Iowa Tests. Over the course of several months, a teacher gathers information that results in a rating of the student’s achievement of these skills and knowledge. These scores are based on alternate achievement standards which NCLB allows states to develop to determine proficiency of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.
12. **How do parents get an opportunity to review these rating scales?** Ask teachers to share them with you or go to the Department of Education website and review them online.
13. **Can parents refuse to have their child included in the alternate assessment?** No. All students must be assessed under *NCLB*. Students with IEPs are assessed through either general or alternate assessments as determined by the IEP team. If the local school district has a policy allowing parents to request the district to not test students, this policy should extend to parents of children with disabilities. Parents of enrolled students need to know that if their child does not take the alternate assessment, they are counted as exclusions under

NCLB, which could eventually cause problems for districts in making adequate yearly progress under *NCLB*.

14. **Can I see a copy of my child's alternate assessment results and keep a copy so that I can compare his progress from year-to-year?** Teachers should have a report for parents that summarize each child's performance on the Iowa Alternate Assessment, for that academic year.
15. **When does the alternate assessment need to be administered?** The testing period is from the start of the school year to March 31st.
16. **What are consequences of participating in the alternate assessment?**
Students participating in the alternate assessment receive instruction on grade level content that is reduced in complexity. Students receive access to the general education curriculum, and are allowed to demonstrate their performance on content aligned to grade level standards. IEP teams review participation annually, and it is expected that as students become more proficient on more skills, that students would be considered for exit from the alternate assessment against alternate achievement standards, into the general assessment. Students must participate in alternate assessment because participation ensures that the general curriculum is taught to students with severe disabilities. The consequences of participating in alternate assessment, beyond access to and participation in the general curriculum, is that some students who historically have received a parallel or a different "functional" curriculum may now have part of their school day devoted to instruction aligned to grade level content that all students in their school receive. All students with disabilities in Iowa graduate with a regular diploma, and alternate assessment participation will not impact the type of diploma your child will receive when your child completes the course of study outlined in their IEP.
17. **Is it possible to learn both functional and academic skills at the same time?**
Currently many children with the most significant cognitive disabilities have IEP goals that focus on learning life skills. NCLB and IDEA recognizes that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities can learn both functional and academic skills at the same time. That is, we should not wait to teach a child to read until they have mastered functional skills. Many students with significant cognitive disabilities thrive by learning academic content while they are learning life skills, just as their typical peers do.

For additional information about the alternate assessment, please go to the Department website at:

http://www.iowa.gov/educate/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=461&Itemid=1576